

Talking about Autism in Research

Inclusive and respectful language matters in research!

Why it matters

The language we use when speaking about autism has a significant impact – not only on how autistic individuals are perceived by others, but also on how they view themselves. Some terminology can unintentionally cause harm or reinforce stigma. In contrast, neuro-affirming language recognises autism as a valid identity, rather than something in need of fixing or curing.



Key Principles

Professionals are encouraged to ask each individual how they would like to be referred to, rather than making assumptions. It's important to recognise the diversity within the autistic community and to understand that language which feels respectful and affirming to one person may not feel the same to another. Autistic young people are the experts in their own experience, and language preferences can vary widely. Sensitivity, openness, and a willingness to adapt are essential. These points are not a fixed script, but a flexible starting point to support more thoughtful, inclusive, and person-centred communication.

Recommended language when referring to autistic young people

Avoid saying	Preferred term	Why?
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	Autism	“Disorder” can feel medicalised and stigmatising; “autism” is simpler and reflects identity more accurately.
Person with autism	Autistic person	Many autistic people prefer identity-first language; it reflects autism as part of who they are.
Symptoms	Traits / Characteristics	“Symptoms” implies illness; “traits” better reflects natural variation in how people experience the world.
Challenging behaviour	Describe the behaviour factually	Avoids labelling; encourages professionals to describe what's happening without judgement.
High / Low functioning	Describe individual support needs	These labels are vague and misleading- needs can vary depending on context.
Stereotypy	Stimming	“Stimming” is the term commonly used by autistic people; often a self-regulating behaviour.

Summary

This is intended as a starting point, not a strict set of rules. Every autistic person is different, so it's important to stay flexible, open, and responsive to individual preferences. Professionals are encouraged to continue learning from autistic people themselves and to use this guidance to support more thoughtful, inclusive conversations.

